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SUBJECT: MIDDLE EAST: UNSC MEMBERS WELCOME REGIONAL PEACE
INITIATIVES

11. (SBU) Summary. The UN Security Council held its monthly Middle East meeting on May 28. UNSCO Robert Serry briefed in a public session, and Council members subsequently discussed the issue in closed consultations. Serry welcomed "fragile" progress on the Israeli-Syrian, Lebanese, and Israeli-Palestinian tracks, which he credited to the expanded role of regional actors, but said these gains could be easily reversed absent intensified efforts on the Annapolis track and fruition of the Egyptian-led efforts on Gaza. As usual, most delegations condemned rocket attacks from Gaza into Israel and criticized "disproportionate" Israeli military responses. Six delegations, including France, joined Serry in calling Israel's closure of Gaza "collective punishment." Several delegations also expressed concern that the Annapolis process had not yet yielded positive results on the ground, criticizing in particular continued Israeli settlement activity and construction of the separation barrier, but Amb Wolff cautioned them not to mistake the confidentiality of talks for lack of progress. Costa Rica and Panama called explicitly for international engagement with Hamas, while France said it was "ready to support any efforts to encourage" Hamas to accept the Quartet conditions. All delegations welcomed the Doha Agreement signed by Lebanese leaders as well as the election of Michel Suleiman as President of Lebanon. Several delegations questioned the utility of the monthly Middle East meetings if the UNSC remains unable to agree on an outcome. End Summary.

Serry: Better Month than Usual

12. (SBU) UN Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process (UNSCO) Robert Serry briefed the Council during a public session on May 28. (Note: A transcript of his remarks was e-mailed to IO/UNP and NEA/IPA. End Note.) Emphasizing the new regional dynamic, Serry welcomed "fragile" progress on three tracks -- Israeli-Syrian, Israeli-Palestinian, and the Lebanese dialogue culminating in the Doha Agreement and the election of Michel Suleiman as President. He made four main observations: 1) Egyptian efforts to achieve calm in Gaza are very important and deserve support, 2) progress must be intensified on the Annapolis track, and the parties must be pressed to intensify cooperation and meet Roadmap commitments, 3) regional leadership on issues like Israeli-Syrian peace and internal Lebanese politics should be commended and supported, and 4) the SYG remains committed to the full implementation of all relevant UNSCRs and to a just, lasting, and comprehensive peace in the Middle East. During the closed consultations, Serry described in detail the impact of the lack of fuel and water in response to questions about the humanitarian situation in Gaza. While noting the counterproductive attacks on the crossings, he said resulting Israeli measures "amounted to collective punishment." He argued that restoration of calm in Gaza is a prerequisite for restoring relations between Gaza and the West Bank and for progress on the Israeli-Palestinian track.

Gaza: No to Rockets and Closure

¶3. (SBU) Most delegations condemned both rocket fire from Gaza into Israel as well as "disproportionate" Israeli military responses. France, Russia, Libya, South Africa, Indonesia, and Vietnam characterized Israel's closure of Gaza as "collective punishment," and along with several other delegations, called for an immediate re-opening of the Gaza crossing points. Several European delegations also condemned in particular recent Hamas attacks on the crossing points, which they said only serve to hurt the Palestinian people. South Africa expressed great concern about the humanitarian situation in Gaza, in particular the shortage of water and lack of sewage treatment, and asked UNSCO Serry to become more involved in finding solutions to these problems. Most delegations also expressed support for Egyptian efforts to broker a cease-fire in Gaza between Israel and Hamas.

Whither Annapolis?

¶4. (SBU) Several delegations expressed concern that the Annapolis process had not yet yielded positive results on the ground, criticizing in particular continued Israeli settlement activity and construction of the separation barrier. China, South Africa, the UK, and Belgium called for practical steps to demonstrate progress on the Annapolis track. Libya was the most pessimistic, decrying a lack of "any progress in Israeli-Palestinian negotiations" and arguing that more donor meetings are insufficient to address the situation in Gaza, which they called the "worst crime

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against humanity in the world." South Africa, recalling the hope that an Israeli-Palestinian peace agreement would be concluded by the end of 2008, concluded that the outlook now appeared "bleak." Amb Wolff, noting the intensive U.S. involvement in follow-up to Annapolis, told delegates that these talks are the "most serious the parties have had, touching on all of the core issues." He cautioned against mistaking the confidentiality of the talks for lack of progress.

Engaging Extremists and Radicals

¶5. (SBU) Continuing a theme from past Middle East debates, Costa Rica and Panama called explicitly for international engagement with Hamas, while a few other delegations addressed the issue in more nuanced terms. France, while reiterating its call on Hamas to accept the Quartet conditions, said it was "ready to support any efforts to encourage an evolution (in Hamas's position) along these lines." Russia did not advocate direct talks with Hamas, but cautioned the international community against blocking efforts towards Fatah-Hamas unity. Indonesia also underscored the importance of intra-Palestinian reconciliation and dialogue. Separately, most delegations welcomed the announcement of Israeli-Syrian peace negotiations brokered by Turkey. In this regard, Russia said the Moscow conference could be a useful step forward, but that agreement between the parties was still needed.

Lebanon: Support for Doha Agreement

¶6. (SBU) All delegations welcomed the Doha Agreement signed by Lebanese leaders last week as well as the resulting election of Michel Suleiman as President of Lebanon. Libya said Doha proved that the Lebanese could resolve their own differences if "left alone without foreign interference." Several delegations also emphasized that Doha must be implemented in full, drawing attention in particular to the extension of GOL control over all its territory. Amb Wolff

expressed confidence that Suleiman would be committed to upholding Lebanon's obligations under UNSCRs 1559, 1680, 1701, and 1757. Italy argued that Hizballah's use of force should not translate into political gains beyond those enshrined in the Doha Agreement, but cautioned that international criticism of just one party in Lebanon -- Hizballah -- could undermine intra-Lebanese dialogue. Although disarmament of militias is important, Italy observed that it should be just one part of the overall Lebanese political process. In this context, it is important to "eliminate motivations behind Hizballah's resistance" by placing the Sheba'a Farms under temporary UN trusteeship.

UNSC Irrelevant on the Mideast?

¶7. (SBU) Costa Rica and Panama led several delegations, including South Africa and Italy, in bemoaning the lack of any Council reaction to the monthly Middle East briefings. If the Council is just a discussion forum on the Middle East, they said, what is the point of the monthly meetings? UK PermRep Sawers, noting that Libya had blocked the past three attempts at a Council product on the Middle East, agreed that a monthly meeting without any outcome was unnecessary. He suggested that the meetings be held every 3-4 months instead and that the next SC President (U.S.) consider scrapping the monthly meeting for June entirely. Before other members could agree to Sawers's suggestion, however, Libya and South Africa argued that the monthly meetings are useful if only to "shed light" on the situation in the region, even if the Council cannot bring itself to agree on a statement. In a subsequent meeting of Security Council coordinators, Indonesia expressed its strong preference for continued monthly meetings on the Middle East.
Wolff